

back as 2008, that “Russians make up a pretty disproportionate cross-section of a lot of our assets. . . . We see a lot of money pouring in from Russia.”

In 2013, Mr. Trump said on a talk show: “Well, I’ve done a lot of business with the Russians.”

Due to his history of bankruptcies, no major U.S. bank would loan to Donald Trump in recent years. So he has needed new sources of capital for his real estate projects. There is growing reason to believe that Russia—or at least wealthy Russians—have financial interests in the Trump organization. Recent reports link the President and his companies to ten wealthy former Soviet businessmen with alleged ties to criminal organizations or money laundering. The extent of corruption and criminal ties among the oligarchs of Russia are well known, and to stay wealthy oligarchs, they must stay friendly with the Putin regime.

Is the Trump organization reliant on Russian capital or loans from Russian banks? What relationships are there between Russian oligarchs that are tied to the Russian Government and the Trump organization and between those former Soviet businessmen and Trump’s properties? We need to get to the bottom of this, with a credible, deliberate, nonpartisan investigation.

Mr. Trump has surrounded himself with associates with close Russian ties—not just Mr. Manafort. Michael Flynn headed to Russia within 18 months after his retirement as the head of the Defense Intelligence Agency to celebrate the 10th anniversary of the Russian Government’s media outlet RT. Secretary John Kerry called RT a “propaganda bullhorn” for Putin. Mr. Flynn was paid for that trip by RT, a potential violation of the emoluments clause of the Constitution, and appeared regularly on RT. Flynn, of course, had to resign as National Security Advisor after 24 days in office. But the President knew of Flynn’s misrepresentations weeks before he was fired and did nothing until it became public. We now know that Russia’s payments to Flynn were generous. In 2015, Russian entities paid him \$65,000. We know he worked for pay as a foreign agent for Turkey during the campaign and during the transition, but he failed to register as an agent at the time, as required by law.

Other Trump associates and campaign staff—Roger Stone, Carter Page, and Mr. Gordon—all are reportedly under investigation for intercepted communications and financial transactions with Russia. Stone admitted at least 16 contacts with Gufficer 2.0, the Twitter handle covering for Russian intelligence that released the Democratic National Committee hacked emails.

Page, who has strong financial ties with Russia, admitted to meeting with the Russian Ambassador during the Republican Convention and traveling to Russia during the campaign.

The President’s Attorney General was forced to recuse himself from any

Department of Justice investigation into Trump and Russia because he did not disclose to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee that he met with the Russian Ambassador during the campaign.

Now the President’s son-in-law and senior adviser is set to testify before the Senate’s Intelligence Committee. He will talk about his contacts with the Russian ambassador, a close Putin ally who is head of a Russian-owned bank.

Where does it stop, folks? Where does it stop?

These contacts give us enough reason for pause. Combined with Mr. Trump’s positions on NATO, sanctions relief, and Russia’s human rights violations, they raise serious security questions for the United States and NATO. As I said, we need an independent prosecutor at the helm to ensure that the whole of the investigation is not compromised—one who is not subject to White House pressure and not in a position of investigating his or her boss—and a bipartisan commission along the lines of the 9/11 Commission that is independent of politics.

The chair of the House Intelligence Committee is compromised and damaged beyond repair. He has coordinated with the subjects of his committee’s investigation, and he has completely lost credibility. I compliment my Senate colleagues who are working together on an investigation. But the Senate committee does not have the resources to fully investigate this, and the ranking Democrat on the committee agrees we need an independent investigation that could go further, that could be public, and could be transparent.

A former Acting Director of the CIA called the Russian interference in our election one of the most successful covert operations in history. Former Vice President Cheney has said that what they did could be “considered an act of war.” By covert interference in a U.S. election, Russia pursued a policy to install its favorite candidate as President of the United States. Yet the President has dismissed the National Security Agency findings, accused our national security agencies of acting like Nazi Germany, and leveled fake charges at the former President.

The American people are not fooled, and they want Congress to get to the bottom of this. We in Congress have a solemn duty to the American people to do just that.

I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The senior assistant legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

Mr. TESTER. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

#### VETERANS CHOICE PROGRAM IMPROVEMENT ACT

Mr. TESTER. Mr. President, I rise today in support of the bipartisan Vet-

erans Choice Program Improvement Act. I will start my remarks by saying that Chairman ISAKSON was here earlier, and he had a meeting he had to get to. Johnny has been through a tough surgery, and it is good to have Johnny back. But the fact of the matter is he supports this bill. He is an original cosponsor of this bill. The same could be said of Senator BLUMENTHAL, who also had a meeting and wanted to be here, once again. We heard from Senator SCHATZ earlier. This bill truly has bipartisan support, not only in the VA Committee but also in this body.

The reason people support this piece of legislation is because it brings much needed reforms to the Choice Program while ensuring that veterans can access care in their communities. It is a good bill.

A few years back, the Choice Program was established with the very best of intentions. In my home State of Montana, it is a fact that veterans were waiting far too long for an appointment at the VA and oftentimes had to drive over 100 miles for the appointment. The Choice Program was supposed to allow these veterans to access care closer to home. Unfortunately, it has not been working out the way it should, and veterans have been inundated with redtape and a government contractor that struggles to schedule appointments and pay providers on time. That is why we all worked together—Democrats and Republicans and even Independents—on this bill to put forth these much needed reforms.

The Veterans Choice Program Improvement Act cuts redtape so veterans can access care more quickly. In fact, I made it clear from the get-go that I would not vote to extend the Choice Program until Congress and the VA have addressed some of the biggest concerns I have been hearing from Montana veterans and community providers.

Once we get the bill passed, this program reimburses community providers more quickly for the care they provide to our veterans. It reduces out-of-pocket costs for veterans receiving care through the Choice Program. It improves the sharing of medical records between the VA and the community providers to better ensure seamless care for veterans, whether they are seeing a VA doctor or a doctor in their community. It allows the VA to access all the funding initially appropriated for this program to ensure that veterans’ access to care is not disrupted.

This bill is not going to fix everything, but it is certainly a step in the right direction. With this legislation, combined with assurances that I have received from VA Montana, VA folks within the State will be allowed to schedule appointments for Montana’s veterans directly instead of going through an inept government contract.

It is my hope that we can make the Choice Program work the way it was

intended when we first set it up, with the goal of serving those who have served our country.

I again express my appreciation for taking this bill up on the floor, this Veterans Choice Program Improvement Act, and I think it is a prime example of how this body needs to work together to solve problems—in this case, for our veterans community. We should push this bill out as soon as possible.

I yield the floor to Senator MORAN.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Kansas.

Mr. MORAN. Mr. President, I appreciate the remarks, as well as the working together with the Senator from Montana as we tried to make certain that a program that is so valuable to veterans across the country—in my case particularly, veterans who live in rural America, in Kansas—to make certain that veterans can attain the care they have earned and the care they deserve.

We had a scandal at the VA in which many tragic things happened, and Congress came together at that time and passed the Choice Act. What that law basically has given our veterans is, if they live more than 40 miles from a VA facility—in other words, if they live a long distance from access to care—they can, at their choice, have that care at home: hometown hospital, hometown physician, pharmacy, physical therapy. They can see a provider in their hometown.

In so many instances in Kansas—in fact, I have mentioned this before on the Senate floor. The House district I represented as a Congressman is larger than the State of Illinois, and there is no VA hospital in that congressional district. So veterans not having to travel 2, 3, 4, 5 hours to Denver or to Wichita or to Amarillo is of such value to our veterans, particularly those who have a disability or are aging. What we did in the passage of Choice was so useful to so many veterans.

The other part of that was that if you couldn't get the care you needed within 30 days at the VA, you could then attain your care at home. Again, with the backlog that was occurring at the VA, the lack of providers, this became important to another set of veterans who, because of their health condition, couldn't afford to wait that long to see a physician, to have surgery.

This is important legislation. If you are somebody who cares about veterans, you need to be in favor of this Choice Act. If you are someone who cares about particularly rural or veterans who need timely care, you especially ought to be supportive of Choice.

The challenge we have is that the Choice Act is expiring. It expires August 7, and it needs to be extended. There are dollars available in the program. Mandatory spending is available to pay for the services to a later date.

As the Senator from Montana indicated, there are a number of provisions that haven't worked very well in

Choice because of the bureaucratic nature of the program, the way the program has been established. One of those that are most important is that you have veterans on one side who need the care and choose Choice, but you also need a willing provider. The local hospital, the local physician needs to be willing to provide that care. I have never known a provider who was not honored to provide care to a veteran, but the challenge in many instances becomes whether that provider, that doctor or hospital gets reimbursed, gets paid.

This legislation has a number of reforms, but in my view, one of the most critical and most important is to make the VA the payer, to make the VA be the entity that writes out the check to pay the hospital bill, to pay the physician for the services provided.

So this is another reform that improves really on both sides. It eliminates some of the bureaucracy that a veteran goes through and the number of times a veteran may receive a notice that he or she owes money that should be paid by the Choice Program, and it also encourages—by paying them—the physician or the hospital to provide the service. These are important reforms, important changes in the Choice Act that are worthy of our support.

What is transpiring here are a couple of reforms to the Choice Program and its extension to a later date, until the money expires, so the Choice Program can continue, and Congress can now take that time to determine what we want to do with the Choice Program into the future after that point in time. I appreciate the way in which this legislation has worked.

Often I get asked whether there is any hope that Congress can work together, that Republicans and Democrats can solve problems. This is an example of where that is taking place today, by the care and concern we all have for our veterans and the good will that exists by those who serve in Congress to make sure that good things happen for our military men and women who are now veterans.

I regret that the chairman of the Veterans' Committee, the Senator from Georgia, Mr. ISAKSON, is unable to be with us, but, as the Senator from Montana indicated, he is fully supportive of this legislation. In fact, he is an original sponsor of the legislation.

I add my voice and ask my colleagues to agree to the unanimous consent resolution, that this legislation be passed. It will be another step in solving problems and caring for those who served our Nation.

Yesterday, I was at the Arlington National Cemetery—a reminder of the debt we owe to so many people. Those are veterans who are now deceased. Those are military men and women who have now died. Those who are living deserve the care and treatment that our VA can provide and the opportunities that our providers in our hometowns can assist in providing.

We want to make sure that good things continue to happen. We want to improve the quality of service, get the problems out of the Choice Program, and make sure those who are so deserving of quality care actually receive it.

I yield back to the Senator from Montana.

Mr. TESTER. Mr. President, I would like to thank the good Senator from Kansas for his comments and his leadership not only on the VA Committee on which we both serve but also as chairman of the Appropriations MILCON-VA Subcommittee, the subcommittee that really sees how the money is going to be utilized within the VA. I think Senator MORAN has covered just about all of it. I just want to go back and say one thing.

We are going to have a unanimous consent. I am told there will be an objection to it. That is truly unfortunate because this has been a bipartisan effort. It has cleared everyone in the Senate except one person, to my knowledge, and I think that is unfortunate.

One of the complaints I hear is that the primary payer provision of this bill is the problem. The primary payer provision of this bill requires the VA to be exactly that—the primary payer of the bills. My question would be, Why is this a bad thing? Right now veterans are being hamstrung and delayed, and the folks who provide the benefits, the providers, are not getting the dollars in a timely manner. I would just ask, if the VA is not going to be the primary payer, who is?

These folks have put it on the line for this country, and they come back in different shape than when they left, after they bore the battles of war. Some of the injuries are seen; some of the injuries are unseen. And we are not going to say “You know what. Don't worry about it. We are going to make sure you get the care, and we are going to make sure it is paid for.” It is part of the cost of war. So when we send our young men and women off to war, we ought to be thinking about this stuff. And we have a solution. We have a solution to part of the problems with the Choice Program.

If we get this bill passed, it will give us the opportunity to work together to get a long-term bill passed before the first of the year to really address the needs of our veterans so that there are wraparound services at the VA that veterans can count on.

I would just say that this is supposed to be a very deliberative body, and for the most part, it is pretty deliberative. But when you have a situation of a program that we put into effect—that Congress passed and the Senate had a big part of writing—and it is not working, we ought to fix it, and this bill fixes it in good part. We have some more to do, as I said, but this bill is a step in the right direction in cutting redtape and making it easier for veterans to find care and get care, whether it is in the VA or outside the VA. It

is also something that the Veterans Administration sorely needs to move it forward.

I just want to say that we come in here and we have good arguments and good discussions, and sometimes politics comes into the discussion. In this particular case, folks have come to the table—whether it is Senator ISAKSON or Senator MCCAIN or Senator MORAN or me or any of the others on the Veterans' Affairs Committee—and we have come up with a solution that 99 percent of the people in this body agree with, but we can't get it across the finish line. And we wonder why our popularity is in the single digits in this country.

I am just going to close by saying I want to thank everybody from both sides of the aisle who worked together to get this bill crafted and get this bill to this point. I hope that at some point in time, people will take a look at this bill for what it does and realize that there aren't bogeymen in this bill, that our veterans deserve us to work together to find solutions to move the ball forward so they can get the healthcare they were promised when they signed on the dotted line to protect this country.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Kansas.

Mr. MORAN. Mr. President, it is my understanding that one of my colleagues is en route to speak and perhaps object to this motion that is to be made. I would ask my colleague from Montana if he would mind holding for a few moments until that Senator arrives.

Mr. President, I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The senior assistant legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

Mr. TESTER. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

Mr. TESTER. Mr. President, I was going to ask for unanimous consent that S. 544, the bill we have been talking about, be discharged for immediate consideration, and then someone would have to object to that unanimous consent request—otherwise it would move forward.

I am going to do this on Monday. I hope the Senator who is truly going to object to this will have the opportunity to talk to Secretary Shulkin and Chairman ISAKSON, and he will find out that both those people are in support of this bill.

Hopefully we can come in and do a unanimous consent and get this bill passed on Monday. This is a bill that is good for America's veterans. I think it is good for our community providers, and I think it is very good for the VA. We will hold off today and take care of this after the weekend.

I would like to once again thank all the folks who worked on this bill. A

special thank-you to Senator MORAN for his statements today.

I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The senior assistant legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

Mr. CARPER. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

#### MERRICK GARLAND AND FILLING THE SUPREME COURT VACANCY

Mr. CARPER. Mr. President, I rise today to lend my voice in support of perhaps one of the most qualified individuals ever nominated to the U.S. Supreme Court. I am referring, of course, to Chief Judge Merrick Garland.

Over 1 year ago, on March 16, 2016, a President who was twice elected by significant margins in both the popular vote and the electoral college nominated Judge Garland to fill the vacancy left by the death of Justice Antonin Scalia. President Obama upheld his constitutional duty by submitting a name to the Senate to fill this vacancy.

By submitting the name of Merrick Garland, he gave the Senate a man who has spent his career working to build consensus and to find principled compromises. His impeccable credentials speak for themselves: Harvard undergrad, top of his class; Harvard Law, top of his class; law clerk to Judge Friendly on the Second Circuit and Justice Brennan on the Supreme Court. He served in the Justice Department after a time in private practice.

When tragedy befell Oklahoma City in April of 1995, Merrick Garland led the investigation that brought justice to the perpetrators of that unthinkable act of terrorism. Judge Gorsuch called this work "The most important thing I have ever done in my life."

His career was far from over at that point. In 1997, Republicans and Democrats joined together to confirm Judge Garland to the DC Circuit Court of Appeals, which is often called the "second highest court in the land."

Here is what Senator ORRIN HATCH, former chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee and currently the President pro tempore of the Senate, said of him at the time:

Merrick B. Garland is highly qualified to sit on the DC Circuit. His intelligence and his scholarship cannot be questioned. . . . His legal experience is equally impressive. . . . Accordingly, I believe Mr. Garland is a fine nominee. I know him personally, I know of his integrity, I know of his legal ability, I know of his honesty, I know of his acumen, and he belongs on the court.

Those are not my words. Those are the words of Senator ORRIN HATCH, a good friend and colleague.

Over the past two decades on the DC Circuit Court of Appeals, Judge Garland established a reputation as a thoughtful judge, a fair judge, a man of

high integrity, a judicial moderate, and a consensus builder in a day and age when we need consensus builders—not here but on the Supreme Court and other courts.

Even those who may disagree with him tend to find themselves thinking a little harder about their own views after hearing his.

During his 2005 confirmation hearing to serve as Chief Justice, John Roberts, who served with Judge Garland on the DC Circuit, stated these words: "Any time Judge Garland disagrees, you know you're in a difficult area."

Thank you, Chief Justice Roberts.

In 2013, Judge Garland was promoted to chief judge on the DC Circuit Court of Appeals, the second highest court in the land—the chief judge, presiding over that court.

When President Obama nominated him to the Supreme Court over 1 year ago, Judge Garland brought with him more Federal judicial experience than any nominee in the history of the United States.

When I met with Judge Garland last year, I got to know him beyond just his resume. Ironically, he had actually performed the marriage ceremony for my former chief of staff and his bride several years ago.

I was struck by Judge Garland's humility and by his personal character, his personal traits. Even as a nominee for the Supreme Court, he continued to serve his community as a mentor to elementary school students right here in Washington, DC. Imagine that. A chief judge of the DC Circuit Court of Appeals taking time every week to mentor some kid who needs another good role model in his or her life. That is something that Judge Garland has done for about two decades.

Over 1 year later, as I stand here today, a seat on the Supreme Court—what should be, in my view, Judge Garland's seat—remains vacant. Our Republican colleagues, in an unprecedented display of what I think is obstructionism and partisanship, denied Judge Garland a hearing and a vote. Many of our Republican colleagues refused to even meet with him. He was denied both a hearing in the Judiciary Committee and a cloture vote in the full Senate.

Well, since the Senate Judiciary Committee began holding public hearings on Supreme Court nominees 101 years ago, in 1916, no Supreme Court nominee had ever been denied a hearing and a vote.

I will say that again. No Supreme Court nominee had ever been denied a hearing and a vote—well, until Judge Garland.

According to the highly respected website, SCOTUSblog, we read these words:

The historical record does not reveal any instances since at least 1900 of the president failing to nominate and/or the Senate failing to confirm a nominee in a presidential election year because of the impending election.

That is right off the blog.